

Civil War Book Review

Fall 2005

Article 13

Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life

William K. Scarborough

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Scarborough, William K. (2005) "Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss4/13>

Review

Scarborough, William K.

Fall 2005

Deyle, Steven *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. Oxford University Press, \$29.95, hardcover ISBN 195160401

Internal slave trade integral to southern society

Author asserts interregional commerce sustained slavery

For nearly 60 years after the publication of Frederic Bancroft's pioneering work, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, historians devoted little attention to the domestic slave trade, arguably the most insidious feature of the peculiar institution. Within the last 15 years, however, scholars of the slave South have suddenly become captivated by the subject. Michl Tadman inaugurated this resurrection of interest with his 1989 study entitled *Speculators and Slaves*. Then, just two years ago, Robert Gudmestad addressed the subject with his book, *A Troublesome Commerce*, and now, Steven Deyle, who commenced this study ten years ago as a doctoral dissertation under Eric Foner at Columbia, has written perhaps the most comprehensive work to date on the domestic trade, which he terms on page 173 "the lifeblood of the southern slave system." In light of these three excellent works and a number of important recent articles, it is difficult to discern any need for additional studies of the subject in the foreseeable future.

Deyle describes the domestic traffic in human chattel as the very lynchpin of southern slave society as well as a fundamental part of 19th century American society in general. Indeed, he asserts that the institution of slavery could not have survived without the enormous interregional transfer of slaves from Upper to Lower South and the hundreds of thousands of local sales, many of which were occasioned by court action or the division of estates. Moreover, contrary to the stereotypical view that only a few hardened, uncouth, socially unacceptable professional traders were engaged in this deplorable trade, the author contends that all elements of southern society--bankers, lawyers, commission merchants, brokers, and auctioneers as well as the actual buyers and sellers--were complicit in this activity. Throughout his study, the author emphasizes the visibility of the

Negro trade. Yet, because that trade, with its almost ubiquitous separation of slave families, was the least defensible aspect of the peculiar institution, white Southerners chose to minimize its importance. Thus, just as most Germans professed to be ignorant of the dimensions of the Holocaust, so too did Southerners deny the extent and ramifications of the domestic commerce in human beings.

The author devotes the first four chapters of his book to an examination of the interregional trade. Adopting Tadman's figures, he claims that 875,000 slaves were transferred from the Upper to Lower South during the four decades between 1820 and 1860. Of that number, again accepting Tadman's estimate, he says that between 60 and 70 percent were shipped to the Gulf South by professional traders, either by sea or in overland coffles. It was only through this sale of excess slaves to the cotton South that such states as Virginia and Maryland were able to survive economically. Although this transfer of slaves from the exporting to importing states proved mutually beneficial, it also ultimately engendered friction between the two sub-regions. Many in the Deep South became concerned lest the influx of slaves from the so-called "frontier" states might lead to a diminution of the latter's commitment to slavery. The debate over reopening the African slave trade in the late 1850s exacerbated this division, as opposition to the proposal was almost universal in the Upper South while it commanded substantial support in the slave-importing states. In the end, however, it was the dependence of Virginia and other border slave states on the domestic trade that led that state and three others to secede following the attack on Fort Sumter. Deyle also credits the professional traders with being the principal agents driving the market revolution in the South. Characterizing them on page 96 as "modern entrepreneurial businessmen," he asserts that they were capitalists in every sense of the word.

Despite his emphasis in earlier chapters on the speculative activities of such well-known professional traders as Isaac Franklin, John Armfield, Rice C. Ballard, Austin Woolfolk, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, the author abruptly declares on page 144 that "the overwhelming majority of enslaved people who were sold "were sold locally, from one individual to another or as a result of judicial or estate sales. Indeed, he asserts on page 157, "of the more than 2 million slaves who were sold in America between 1820 and 1860, more than two-thirds were sold to local buyers." Clearly, there is a discrepancy in the figures cited by the author. If two-thirds (1,332,000) of the two million slaves were sold locally, then approximately 668,000 were sold in the interregional

trade. Yet elsewhere in the book Deyle claims that 60-70 percent (525,000 to 612,500) of the 875,000 slaves transported to the Southwest were shipped by professional traders. Whatever the figures, local sales were the most visible manifestations of the trade in human flesh and the ones that involved most members of the community.

In chapters six and seven, Deyle examines how the trade was viewed both within and outside the slave South. For the abolitionists, it was the most vulnerable chink in the armor of those who defended the slave system. Consequently, they seized every opportunity to exploit the evils of the domestic trade as reflected in slave auctions, slave coffles, and family separations. Hard pressed to defend this most horrendous feature of slavery, Southerners resorted to the so-called paternalist ideology, which emphasized, as Deyle states on page 218, the individual slaveholder's "honest concern and sympathy for enslaved individuals," and sought to make the professional trader the scapegoat for all the evils associated with the domestic trade.

Despite the author's prodigious research in 38 archives, 100 newspapers, and a vast array of other sources, and a writing style, which, if not particularly imaginative, is clear and commendably jargon-free, there are several problems with this book. Chief among these are a propensity for repetition, especially in the earlier chapters, a number of inconsistencies, one of which was mentioned earlier, and above all a tendency to exaggerate the importance of the domestic trade as the defining feature of slavery. For example, one might question Deyle's contention that the high value of slave property was attributable primarily to the domestic trade, or that slavery could not have survived in the absence of this trade, or that the professional traders were most instrumental in stimulating the market revolution in the South. Nor is it true that slave prices generally followed the price of cotton, an assertion made on page 56 only to be repudiated 15 pages later with respect to the decade of the 1850s. Finally, his estimate on page 122 that overseer salaries were \$100-200 a year is far too low. Notwithstanding these criticisms, **Carry Me Back** is an important book, perhaps the most complete study yet written on one of the greatest evils of the southern slave system. As such, it merits the careful attention of all scholars and students of the slave South.

William K. Scarborough is the author or editor of five books and numerous articles on the Civil War and the plantation South. His latest book, Masters of the Big House (Louisiana State University Press, 2003), won the Jules and

Frances Landry Award from LSU Press, and he has recently received both the Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award and the B.L.C. Wailes Award for the entire body of his work.